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U.S. Strategic Force Structures: The Challenge Ahead

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Following is an address by Paul H. Nitze, Special Adviser to the President and Secretary of State on Arms Control Matters, before the American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics Strategic Systems Conference, Monterey, California, February 4, 1986.

During President Reagan's second term, several factors will play a significant role as the Administration determines its security policy. The most important of these factors will be the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI); the development of U.S.-Soviet relations, including the arms control process as embodied in the Geneva negotiations and the projected series of Reagan-Gorbachev summit meetings; and, finally, the Gramm-Rudman-Hollings balanced budget act. In confluence, these factors and the policy they will shape will have a substantial and long-term effect on our strategic force structure. I propose to review briefly the approach taken thus far by this Administration in shaping our strategic forces and then to provide an assessment of how these factors of the President's second term may affect those forces.

The Reagan Approach

When President Reagan assumed office, existing U.S. deterrence policy called for maintenance of a range of nuclear response options and set the goal of terminating any war on terms most favorable for the nation. The Reagan Administration continued this policy but recognized several deficiencies in our strategic force structure that hampered its implementation.

Among these shortcomings were a vulnerable command and control structure, an increasingly vulnerable ICBM [intercontinental ballistic missile] force, U.S. inferiority in prompt hard-target-kill capability, and an aging bomber force. In response, the President approved a comprehensive program to modernize our strategic forces, which includes new deployments in all three legs of our strategic triad and a robust effort to upgrade our command, control, communications, and intelligence capabilities.

The President also sought to engage the Soviet Union in arms reduction negotiations, determined that our approach to arms control would not repeat the mistakes of the past. He realized that arms control should be viewed as an important element of our security policy and, as such, a complement to, not in opposition to, the measures we must take unilaterally to maintain an adequate deterrent.

While arms control can potentially play a role in enhancing our security and bringing about a more stable strategic relationship, what we are able and willing to do for ourselves is far more important; it provides the necessary foundation on which deterrence and arms control must rest.

The President also directed that our arms control efforts be designed not merely to regulate the buildup of nuclear weapons, as was the case in SALT [strategic arms limitation talks], but, rather, to achieve strategically significant and stabilizing reductions.

Finally, while accepting the continuing need for reliance on offensive weapons and the ultimate threat of devastating retaliation as the basis for deterrence, the President directed that the SDI research program investigate the possibility of increasingly shifting the basis of deterrence to defensive capability. This has been construed by some as a shift from deterrence exclusively by retaliation to deterrence exclusively by denial.

Such a distinction is a theoretical construct which has had little bearing on the actual practice of deterrence. In actuality, an adversary is deterred from attacking the United States and its allies by the cumulative effect of a wide variety of disincentives. Taken together, these deny a would-be attacker the prospective benefits of aggression.

Our requirement to maintain a credible ability to deny and, thereby, to deter is a longstanding one; it is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. The task is made especially difficult by the Soviet Union's relentless efforts—in both the strategic offensive and defensive arenas—to counter and to diminish the deterrent effect of our disincentives.

We are taking those steps necessary to continue effective deterrence in the face of projected Soviet counteractions.

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In this connection, we are both pursuing the deployment of improved offensive systems and exploring technologies which we hope will enable us, over the long term, to rely more heavily on strategic defenses to deter Soviet attack. We believe such an approach offers, for today and for the future, mankind's best hope to preserve the peace.

President Reagan's Second Term

How will President Reagan's second term affect our strategic force structure? I mentioned earlier that three factors will be particularly influential.

- The first of these, the continuation of the Strategic Defense Initiative, presents the potential of profoundly changing force structures, but only in the long term.
- The second, developments in U.S.-Soviet relations, including not only the Geneva arms control talks but also the Reagan-Gorbachev summit just held and the two projected to come, also presents the potential for substantial change, perhaps sooner than SDI.
- The third, the application of the Gramm-Rudman-Hollings act, will begin to be felt almost immediately, although the full extent of the impact is difficult to project.

Let me address each of these in some detail.

The Strategic Defense Initiative

We are now almost 3 years into the SDI research program. Our scientists have made impressive advances in their investigation of the many technologies that would be involved in a large-scale strategic defense system. We continue to believe that these technologies hold the promise of resulting in survivable and cost-effective defenses against ballistic missile attack, thereby providing us with safer and more reliable means of assuring deterrence.

But much more work must be done before we will know whether such defenses can meet the President's criteria of feasibility, survivability, and cost-effectiveness at the margin. It now appears that we will be well into the 1990s before that determination can be made. In the meantime, we are examining carefully the manner in which a transition to greater reliance on defensive systems might proceed.

Our preference, of course, is for a cooperative transition, jointly managed by the United States and the Soviet Union. We believe such an approach can contribute to stability and serve to facilitate the reduction in offensive nuclear forces which remains our foremost objective.

As for the question of how a cooperative transition might be characterized, our research is still in too early a stage and the future strategic situation is too uncertain for any definitive judgment. We must yet determine which defensive technologies are feasible, their probable cost, their survivability, their effectiveness against countermeasures, and how their deployment could be most effectively and verifiably regulated.

I have discussed SDI largely in terms of a cooperative transition, the course the Administration would much prefer. It should be recognized, however, that the Soviets have given absolutely no encouragement to such a concept. Indeed, the Soviets give every programmatic indication of pursuing their own, noncooperative transition to an offense-defense mix by deploying an illegal radar system and apparently developing other capabilities in violation of the ABM [Anti-Ballistic Missile] Treaty. President Reagan has determined and reported to Congress that the U.S.S.R. may be preparing the base for a prohibited territorial defense; the Soviets, thus far, have failed meaningfully to address our concerns about these activities or otherwise correct their noncompliance. As of now, there is no evidence that they will do other than continue to acquire defensive capabilities—including those envisioned for SDI—on a noncooperative basis. This being the case, we must be ready, if necessary, to act on our own. Paradoxically, our being prepared for a noncooperative transition could ultimately provide the Soviets with a powerful incentive to cooperate in the future.

Developments in U.S.-Soviet Relations

As SDI research continues through the second term, we will be proceeding concurrently with our efforts to improve U.S.-Soviet relations. Our immediate goal in the Geneva talks on nuclear and space arms is to achieve strategically significant and verifiable reductions in offensive weapons, properly tailored so as to enhance strategic stability. Such cuts would be valuable whether or not we ended up deploying strategic defenses, and we see no reason not to negotiate them now.

Last fall, we saw the effect that setting a specific date for a U.S.-Soviet summit can have on the arms control talks. Where the Soviets had refused to make concrete proposals in the negotiating groups dealing with offensive arms—or even to disclose many details of their position—during the first two rounds, they took a much different stance in round three. In September, they tabled specific proposals for offensive reductions, and they fleshed out these proposals with additional ideas in October.

With a second summit in the United States looming this year, we anticipate that this pace will be maintained. We have already seen General Secretary Gorbachev's arms control announcement last month, which, although largely designed to maximize its political and public relations impact, did move away somewhat from previous Soviet positions. Whether this can form the basis for genuine progress remains to be seen.

In the strategic offensive area, the two sides agree on the desirability of deep cuts in the size of their arsenals. This agreement was codified in the joint statement from the Geneva summit as mutual support for "the principle of 50% reductions in the nuclear arms of the U.S. and the USSR appropriately applied." The agreement of the sides on this principle, however, should not obscure the fact that there are substantial differences in how each specifies the systems to which the 50% cuts would apply. As experience has shown, when evaluating Soviet proposals, it is advisable to examine the fine print.

The United States would apply the cuts to those systems historically limited in strategic arms negotiations—ICBMs, SLBMs [submarine-launched ballistic missiles], and heavy bombers. The Soviets would apply them to those systems "capable of reaching the territory of the other side," which they interpret as including on the U.S. side LRINF [longer range intermediate-range nuclear forces] missiles in Europe, dual-capable aircraft in Europe and Asia, and dual-capable aircraft on 14 carriers, while excluding 2,000 or more comparable systems on the Soviet side.

To accept the Soviet definition would require us to accept overwhelming Soviet advantages in strategic and INF [intermediate-range nuclear forces] systems. Therefore, there can be no significant progress on reducing strategic offensive arms until the Soviets follow the precedent they set in both SALT I and SALT II and drop their insistence on this one-sided definition.

With the public presentation of the Soviet initiative of January 15, both sides have now advocated the complete elimination of nuclear weapons. Because of the far-reaching nature of this ultimate objective, the many complexities

involved, and the many nations which must concur in their resolution, current negotiating efforts must focus on taking the first steps in actual reductions of U.S. and Soviet offensive nuclear arms.

The Soviet initiative of January 15 does not alter their position on initial reductions of strategic offensive forces; their one-sided definition remains the key element of their proposal. Accordingly, early progress in this area may be difficult. However, the several upcoming negotiating rounds in Geneva and the two planned summits will give the Soviets plenty of opportunity during the President's second term to remove this boulder blocking progress.

One cannot now determine whether an agreement is possible and, if so, what its outlines would be. We, therefore, have made no decisions about the precise force structure we would adopt were such an accord to be reached. One can speculate, however, as to how our forces and Soviet forces would be affected under the U.S. approach.

To review quickly, the United States proposes reductions to a limit of 4,500 on the number of reentry vehicles (RVs) carried on the ICBMs and SLBMs of each side, with a sublimit of 3,000 ICBM RVs. We also propose a 50% reduction in Soviet strategic ballistic missile throw-weight, to about 6 million pounds (the United States currently has about 4.4 million pounds), and a ban on new or modernized heavy ICBMs. Contingent on acceptance of these limits, we would accept an equal limit of 1,500 ALCMs [air-launched cruise missiles] on the heavy bombers of each side.

With respect to strategic nuclear delivery vehicles, the United States proposes reductions to a limit of 1,250–1,450 strategic ballistic missiles and, given that, reductions of heavy bombers to a limit of 350. We would also ban mobile ICBMs, due, in part, to inherent verification difficulties.

Under this approach, U.S. levels would be affected primarily by the ballistic missile reentry vehicle and ALCM ceilings. The bomber limit would require the destruction of our inactive B–52s, but the missile limit should not be a governing limitation, given the low number to which the RV limits would, in any case, drive us.

The 4,500 limit on ballistic missile RVs would require about a 50% reduction from the current U.S. SALT-accountable total; the 3,000 sublimit on ICBM RVs should not be restricting. Clearly, a large portion of the reductions would be absorbed by our sea-based leg, which currently encompasses substantially more than 4,500 RVs. The United States would, therefore, deploy a number of Trident missiles that would be substantially lower than the combined number of Trident and Poseidon missiles deployed today. The exact number would be determined in a tradeoff between the land-based and sea-based legs. As to the land-based leg, there should be plenty of room for a full complement of 100 MX missiles and a significant number of other ICBM forces.

With respect to the U.S. air-based leg, if the Soviets were to accept our approach, the planned ALCM program would be reduced by about 50% to the 1,500 level. This would also affect our mix of ALCM-carrying and penetrating heavy bombers.

Similarly, we can speculate on how Soviet strategic force planners might structure their forces, were they to accept our approach. They would likely be constrained primarily by our proposed 4,500 RV limit and the 3,000 ICBM RV sublimit. The 4,500 limit would require the Soviets to reduce their ballistic missile RVs by a little more than 50% from their current SALT-accountable level of about 9,700. The bulk of these reductions would necessarily come from their ICBM forces. The Soviet land-based leg would likely consist of SS–18s, SS–24s, and SS–25s, which would have to be deployed in nonmobile modes, and perhaps some SS–19s. This force would probably be at or near the 3,000 RV limit.

The Soviet sea-based leg would, therefore, consist of about 1,500 SLBM RVs, likely deployed on MIRVed [multiple independently-targetable reentry vehicle] SS–N–20s and SS–N–23s and single-RV SS–N–8s. Like the United States, they could be expected, over time, to deploy 1,500 ALCMs.

The Soviets have proposed that first-stage reductions occur over a period of 5–8 years. The United States has not specified a schedule for its proposal but probably could agree to a pace of reductions similar to that in the Soviet proposal.

The Gramm-Rudman-Hollings Act

In contrast to SDI and the arms control process, the Gramm-Rudman-Hollings act and the deficit reductions process it mandates will definitely have some near-term effect on our strategic forces, although this impact may not be felt in our force structure until some years hence.

In the FY [fiscal year] 1986 budget, the Defense Department has been able to protect the SDI program from funding cuts and to apportion the cuts among other strategic programs so as to avoid significant effects. In FY 1987 and beyond, however, the required deficit reduction will be much larger and, should automatic cuts be necessitated, the Department of Defense will have less flexibility in implementing them. Due to the many variables involved in the process—such as whether Congress and the Administration can agree on a budget or, instead, must rely on automatic cuts, and the size of the spending reductions necessary to meet the deficit target—it is impossible to arrive at specific predictions about the extent to which strategic force spending will be affected.

My own belief is that the President and the Congress will take the actions necessary to preclude drastic reductions in defense spending. The question may become one of projecting the effect that any limited cuts would have. A few general observations seem warranted.

First, we can expect greater emphasis than before on cost-effectiveness. I would expect the Pentagon to take a closer look at existing systems to ensure that their continuing contribution to our security is worth the cost of maintaining them. Similarly, in examining options for future systems, I would expect them to take extra care to define precisely the force structure characteristics that will enhance effectiveness and ensure that a given program option meets that goal in the least costly way. As a result, we might see some changes in program sizes or schedules and, perhaps, some early retirements.

At the same time as we are emphasizing cost-effectiveness, however, there are pressures for accepting higher unit costs in order to reduce annual expenditures while protecting overall program procurement levels. We may, therefore, see stretchouts of some strategic modernization programs.

If defense spending cuts become more significant, such that substantial changes in the overall U.S. force posture become necessary, then we will be forced into a difficult choice between sustaining our current nuclear force modernization programs and continuing our present level of effort to redress the conventional force imbalance.

Historically, this dilemma has been decided in favor of nuclear forces, due to their high cost-effectiveness compared to conventional forces. On the other hand, there are strong reasons for avoiding, if possible, increased reliance

on nuclear weapons for deterrence. The fact is that President Reagan remains strongly committed to, and places the highest priority on, his strategic modernization program in order that we may maintain the credibility of our present deterrent posture.

Conclusion

One can conclude from this review that we are entering a dynamic period in the strategic force arena. The President's policy is clear—to move forward with the strategic modernization program, the SDI research program, and our arms control efforts, in accordance with the general objectives and guidelines established in the first term. But many questions remain to be answered, either during the second term or thereafter. When those answers are realized, they could profoundly affect our strategic force structure.

Will our SDI research succeed? Will the Soviet Union be willing to negotiate an equitable, verifiable agreement implementing the deep reductions they claim to support? Will substantial cuts in defense spending be necessitated? In any case, the closest collaboration between the services, other elements of the executive branch, and the defense industry will be necessary as we meet the challenge posed by this dynamic period. ■

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